

Liberty Foster Care

Liberty Foster Care Limited

Passfield Business Centre, Lynchborough Road, Passfield, Liphook, Hampshire GU30 7SB

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This private company is owned and managed by the responsible individual and the registered manager. At the time of this inspection, the agency provided support and supervision to 31 approved foster care households and 48 children looked after. The provider states in its statement of purpose that the agency provides a positive, safe and nurturing experience of foster care for children in emergency, short-term and long-term placements, and a small number of specialist provisions, including short breaks and parent and child homes.

The registered manager has been in post since June 2009.

Due to COVID-19, at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers carried out under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF) on 17 March 2020. We returned to routine SCCIF inspections on 12 April 2021.

Inspection dates: 11 to 14 October 2021

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	requires improvement to be good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	requires improvement to be good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	requires improvement to be good
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The independent fostering agency is not yet delivering good help and care for children and young people. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted.

Date of last inspection: 19 February 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: requires improvement to be good

Most of the children make good progress and live with stable and long-term fostering families who provide the children with warm and nurturing homes. Children build trusting and secure relationships with their carers, who know them well and understand their needs. However, for some of the children, the quality of care has been undermined by shortfalls in the agency's safeguarding practices and record-keeping. Moreover, several requirements and recommendations made at the last inspection have not been met.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the carers say that they have felt well supported, which has helped them to carry out their role during this time. The frequency of supervision has remained consistent via virtual means and returned to face-to-face visiting as soon as it was possible. Extra support, such as virtual coffee mornings, a sunflower growing competition and regular updates, has been appreciated by the fostering families.

There is a strong agency focus on supporting the children to achieve academically. Carers and the staff are ambitious for the children and have high aspirations for them. Practical measures include providing children with individual tuition. Carers commented on how much the children valued receiving personalised certificates from the registered manager in recognition of their successes. This helps the children to recognise their strengths and achievements.

Carers recognise and nurture the children's interests and talents. The children enjoy attending a range of activities and clubs. The carers collect and store photos and special mementos for the children. These measures help the children to explore their life story and to stay connected and maintain important relationships.

The agency supports the children to have visits with their birth family and other adults who are important to them. This includes the children's brothers and sisters who may not live with them. Carers recognise the enduring and often life-lasting relationships between siblings. For example, one carer arranged for the children's brother to join the fostering family on Christmas day.

The registered manager and the supervising social workers consider how their carers can meet a new child's needs before their arrival to a fostering family. However, the matching documents do not reflect this or show sufficient consideration or information about the impact on the existing children in the family. Two children were found to have moved to carers without matching plans. This lack of important information hinders the carers in providing a safe environment that enables them to keep the child, other children in the fostering household and the carers safe.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: requires improvement to be good

Learning identified from an in-house independent investigation, following a serious incident that occurred at the agency, has not been fully embedded in practice. The agency has failed to ensure that full information is received from the local authority and shared with the carers so that appropriate and safe care can take place. On two occasions, parent-and-baby carers were not provided with copies of the local authority placement planning meeting minutes. Consequently, the carers were not provided with clarity to their roles and responsibilities with regard to the day-to-day arrangements within their home.

Supervising social workers carry out agency risk assessments and safer care plans to support carers in meeting the needs of the children in their care. However, these do not consistently detail all relevant practical information, strategies and information to enable the carers to respond to and manage risks effectively.

On rare occasions when children have gone missing from care, they have not always received a well-coordinated response. In records for one child's missing-from-care occurrence, there were no entries of the actions taken by the supervising social worker. The child's risk assessment did not set out what actions the carer should follow. Consequently, risks for this child were not understood or reduced.

Not all children receive return home interviews when they have been missing from care. This is a missed opportunity for the children and the adults to gain a greater understanding of the risks the children may have been exposed to, and why the children may have run away.

Carers receive regular supervision visits that are focused on the children's experiences, needs and plans. However, some supervising social workers' visits are not up to date, and some entries are not sufficiently specific to inform practice concerns.

Insufficient attention was paid to an emerging picture of practice concerns and issues relating to one fostering household. For example, when a carer was found to be locking the fridge, the carer's actions were not robustly addressed at the earliest opportunity by the supervising social worker. As a result, the quality of care provided to the children has not met the expected standards of care.

A shortfall was identified in relation to Ofsted not being notified of several reportable incidents. This was due to a misinterpretation of the regulations by the registered manager. Children were not put at risk by these as other safeguarding processes were followed appropriately.

The agency promotes safe care and undertakes unannounced visits for carers annually. Carers understand the risks that the internet may pose for the children. Overall, recruitment, assessment and support of carers focus on child protection.

The agency staff and the carers have good relationships with other professionals, which means that they work well together for the benefit of the children. Feedback from external colleagues is positive. A local authority placement officer described the organisation as the 'go-to agency'.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good

The commitment of the registered manager and the responsible individual to improve the lives of children is evident in this agency. The registered manager has systems in place to monitor the children's progress and safe practice. However, planned changes to the leadership structure, the COVID-19 pandemic, and an unfilled staff vacancy have all contributed towards shortfalls in management oversight, particularly of the quality of recording.

The agency's 'review of the quality of care report' was received by Ofsted just prior to this inspection. The last such report was received by Ofsted over two years ago. As a result, there has been a considerable period in which inspectors have been unable to review the quality and effectiveness of the agency's monitoring activities.

Training is sufficient and proactive. Staff and the carers are provided with opportunities to develop their practice through the identification of and response to their individualised training needs. However, one example was found of a carer not completing the skills to foster training before they were approved. This was addressed on inspection and the carer will complete this before they can foster.

The panel composition does not give sufficient breadth of independent scrutiny or insight from outside the social care world. The vice-chair and the registered manager are aware of this and have begun to take steps to recruit more panel members. In the meantime, to provide a level of independence, there is some swapping of roles when presenters become panel members and vice versa.

The agency decision-maker decision minutes provide brief notes of the rationale for approval, using the wording of the panel. The decision-maker's approach is not robust in evaluating the quality of the panel discussion minutes and reporting back to the panel on the quality of its work.

Recruitment meets the requirement to ensure that staff are safe adults. However, some recruitment records do not demonstrate tight adherence to safer recruitment practice. For example, the dates of telephone verification references are not recorded. In another example, the registered manager failed to verify with a relevant employer the reason employment ended for a staff member.

The agency is valued by the children and carers, who speak highly about the support they receive. The agency has significantly increased its number of fostering households since the last inspection. The majority of new carers joining the agency have been recommended by current carers. This is a testament to the supportive nature and inclusive ethos that permeate throughout the agency.

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>The registered person must maintain a system for—</p> <p>monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and</p> <p>improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency.</p> <p>The registered person must provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted for the purposes of paragraph (1) and, on request, to any local authority. (Regulation 35 (1)(a)(b) (2))</p> <p>This requirement was made at the last inspection and is restated</p>	1 December 2021
<p>If any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table. (Regulation 36 (1))</p> <p>This requirement was made at the last inspection and is restated.</p>	1 December 2021
<p>The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that—</p> <p>the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11 (a))</p>	1 December 2021

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the children's safety and welfare are promoted in all fostering placements. In particular, risk assessments should be up to date and provide sufficient guidance and advice on how to keep children safe. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 4.3)
- The registered person should ensure that they only suggest foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to meet the child's assessed needs, and the impact of the placement on existing household members has been considered and is reflected in the matching planning. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 15.1)
- The registered person should ensure that entries in records, decisions and reasons for them. In particular, records for safeguarding and missing-from-care incidents should detail all the actions taken, at what time they were taken and the rationale behind any decision made. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 26.5)
- The registered person should ensure that in reaching a decision or making a qualifying determination, the decision-maker considers 'Hofstetter v LB Barnet and IRM (2009)' and approach a case accordingly. ('The Children Act 1989, Guidance and Regulations, Volume 4: Fostering Services', 5.40)
- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice. This relates to ensuring that dates are recorded when telephone verifications of references are received, and that the reason employment ended for a staff member is verified with the relevant employer. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 19.2)
- The registered person should ensure that the care and support provided to children minimise the risk that they will go missing from care and reduce the risk of harm should the child go missing. This relates to ensuring that the children receive a return home interview. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 5.1)
- The registered person should ensure that the number, skills, knowledge and experience of persons on the central list are sufficient to enable the fostering service to constitute panels that are equipped to make competent recommendations to the fostering service provider, taking into account the nature of the children and carers who the service caters for. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 14.8)
- The registered person should ensure that each foster carer is aware of all the necessary information available to the fostering service about a child's circumstances, including any significant recent events, to help the foster carer understand and predict the child's needs and behaviours and support the child within their household. The fostering service should follow up with the responsible authority where all such necessary information has not been provided by the authority. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 3.9)

- The registered person should ensure that the staff understand the nature of records maintained and follow the service's policy for maintaining up-to-date records. There should be a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record-keeping, and action taken when needed. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 26.2)
- The registered person should ensure that appropriate training on safer caring is provided for all members of the foster household before approval to foster, ensuring that foster carers understand how safer caring principles should be applied in a way which meets the needs of individual children. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 20.9)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people using the 'Social care common inspection framework'. This inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC397846

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Inspectors

Anne-Marie Davies, Social Care Inspector
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